

How to get over the loss of a pet

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For some people, a pet is an extension of themselves, a companion in the truest sense of the word.

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It was day three when I decided to seek help. I had finally admitted the situation was beyond my capacity to manage. I'd dropped down in weight by several kilos because of a lack of appetite, was emotionally drained from lack of sleep and unable to concentrate on any task. Curled in a ball on the couch, I did something out of the ordinary. I called a woman I'd interviewed for a story.

She was a Buddhist nun I'd met at a neuroscience conference, a Western woman who had taken her vows and become a respected teacher and master: Ven Thubten Chokyi, international director of Liberation Prison Project. I'd met her as a confident journalist but was now a blithering wreck on the other end of the phone.

"Hello Chokyi. It's Ruth. I'm so sorry to bother you with this but I don't know how to move on. A terrible thing has happened ..." I stopped and paused. The words "terrible thing" stung my mouth like acid due to the comparative trivia of what I was about to say. "My beloved cat ... my pet ... never came home." I was crying as I spoke.

There. It was out. My petty First World dilemma. The world was falling to pieces, children were dying, poverty, Islamic State, climate change, global suffering and horror in 3-D. And here I was, a middle-class Western woman, employed, healthy and safe, shattered by the loss of a pet.

“I feel terrible. I’m too ashamed to ask for help because it’s such a small thing. But you see, he’s like my child.” I told her he was my loyal beloved friend, sleeping on my pillow at night, wandering under my feet, making me crazy, making me laugh, and there through life’s trials for more than a decade.

We all know that when we get a cat, a dog, a bird their life spans are short. Worse if they get sick, hit by a car or escape like this baby, who went out one night for a wee and never came back. But my god, when the situation arises nothing can prepare you. Nothing prepared me for the way my body felt, the face in the mirror, the lack of self-control. Me walking around like a zombie, with flyers, imagining I could hear him, combing the streets, knocking on doors, obsessing, grieving. What had happened? Where was he?

“It’s OK,” Chokyi said gently, allowing me to grieve.

“But I feel so stupid being this upset,” I spluttered, knowing of her global humanitarian work.

She said it happened with pets. Many people are too ashamed to admit the degree to which they mourn a pet.

“I feel guilty that I’m even heartbroken. I’m so worried, he might be suffering, or scared somewhere, it’s worse not knowing if he’s alive ...” The tears were finally falling freely, something I had denied myself.

And Chokyi was the right person to reach out to because she took my pain very seriously. Buddhists believe sentient beings, including plants, insects and animals, have equal importance to us and even may have been close to us in a past life, in human form, which is why we feel so powerfully connected. Reincarnation doesn’t sit comfortably with me but the act of talking to someone who believed in my right to grieve so hard was enough to assuage my pain.

She reminded me: “Everything passes, we live on shifting sands. Suffering comes from clinging to things we know we have to let go of. Wherever he is, send him love there, tell him you love him and set him free.”

According to Sydney psychologist Jo-Anne Baker, daughter of a vet and herself the mother of many pets, mourning the loss of a pet is not self-indulgent and should be taken as seriously as any other form of grief.

She says the death of a dog, cat or creature is a profound loss. “Animals are full of the purest love, with no judgment, and that sense of acceptance is rare to find in a human companion. So when a pet is taken there’s an enormous grief to come to terms with.

“There’s the missing, the reminder of mortality, the sorrow of letting go, loneliness.”

Baker says many clients call their pets their children. “They can feel utterly bereft and confused after a pet has passed away or not come home or is terminally ill — some pets are taken away due to divorce or breakup. It’s not for others to judge how close that person was to his or her animal or how long it’s appropriate to grieve, in the same way it’s not for us to judge how long another should mourn the breakup of a relationship or the death of a spouse, parent or friend.”

There should be no time limit on the grief, she says. And people need to be respectful of the inner turmoil and feelings of powerlessness that can be present. She deems it cruel for people to make comments like: “It’s only an animal. You can get another dog.” “It’s not a person for goodness’ sakes.

Time to stop crying and move on.” For some people, Baker says, the pet is an extension of themselves, a companion in the truest sense of the word, particularly for the elderly, or children without siblings, or people living alone. “Who’ll be there to greet them at the door? It’s very sad.”

Baker says to be gentle to oneself during the time of loss of a pet. And she reminds us of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, sadness and acceptance.

Denial is the first part of a grieving process, especially when an animal has a disease or has gone missing. Like me, the owner may go searching for cures or the pet’s whereabouts. When the pet dies there is a strange bewilderment and the next phase being anger and “Why?”

Many become guilty and self-recriminatory: “It’s my fault. I was a bad carer.” Then we bargain, which may take the form of crazy conversations with the powers that be, promising to be a better person if the pet survives, or going to a psychic. A plethora of “what if’s” and “if only’s” mark this stage.

Sadness is the fourth stage of grief in the Kubler-Ross model and it never completely goes. Acceptance is the final stage of grief and accepting a loss does not mean forgetting the beloved creature but, rather, moving back to a normal state of mind and perhaps even considering getting a new animal.

My story has a happy ending. I never did stop searching. Not an hour went by I wasn’t doing something proactive. Some said I was “in denial”. I’m not sure which day it was but there one morning, miraculously, was my beloved, under a bush I’d searched under countless times before: bleeding, skinny, too exhausted to meow. Many questions still remain about what had happened and how he’d survived. But that was a couple of years ago and he’s still with me now as I write this. How long for we never know. But he has taught me a powerful and beautiful lesson: how precious and transient is life. And to never forget: love like there’s no tomorrow.

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